

UNWELL

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF THE FINE ARTS

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

**CREATIVE PROJECT:** Unwell

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**PAGES:** 22

Unwell is a short-animated film about the coronavirus pandemic. The narrative of the film focuses on how the pandemic played out in the United States. The film merges my experience with 2D and 3D animation. The various conflicts we have all seen on the news became clear to me when I witnessed a stranger who, in front of his children mocked everyone in the store that was wearing a face mask. What we are experiencing is a serious lack of empathy and it translates directly into infections and fatalities. On the other hand, it resulted in businesses failing and the interruption of our lifestyles. Regardless of how people become infected, it is taking a toll on our healthcare providers. Courageous nurses are saving their lives.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract	2
List of Images	4
Statement of the Problem	5
Review of Influences and Literature	7
Descriptions and Images of the Artworks	12
Conclusion	20
Exhibition Statement	21
Bibliography	22

## LIST OF IMAGES

**Figure 1.** Concept Art for *Unwell*, (2020)

**Figure 2.** Still from *CNN*, (2020)

**Figure 3.** Glen Keane, Sketches of *Aladdin*, (1992)

**Figure 4.** Still from, *Danny & Annie*, (2010)

**Figure 5.** Concept Art for *Unwell*, (2020)

**Figure 6.** Character Turnaround for Anthony, (2021)

**Figure 7.** Costume design for Anthony, (2020)

**Figure 8.** Character Turnaround for Lizzy, (2021)

**Figure 9.** Still from, *Unwell*, (2021)

**Figure 10.** Still from, *Unwell*, (2021)

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:**

My creative project is an animated film that captures events that occurred early in the coronavirus pandemic. Before the outbreaks our country was already divided over political views. While Public Health officials recommended washing hands and wearing masks, many global and local leaders shunned these ideas initially. Adhering to the COVID-19 guidelines or not made it clear whether people felt the virus was a threat. Some jobs were done remotely from home while other workers were forced to decide between earning their incomes and preserving their communities' health. It caused a deeper chasm between neighbors, defying the restrictions sent a signal that science and facts were not going to change minds. Without using caution people spread COVID-19 to their family and friends that later became sick, some were hospitalized and unfortunately many died shortly after being infected.

The events occurring during coronavirus pandemic have hampered our ability to keep communities safe. This failure was likely due to misinformation amongst critics and the refusal to comply with professional advice from doctors. Rather than having a national strategy to prevent the spread of illness, the Federal Government left state governments to delegate. Regulations varied from state to state, hospitals grappled with the pandemic for many reasons; they ran low on personal protection equipment (PPE), hospital beds and staff. Each day I was saddened by stories of loss, many of whom were nurses and doctors that were just doing their jobs. The pandemic took the elderly, the vulnerable and even young children. While families grieved, others carried on without hesitation. It frustrated me that some people decided to be irresponsible and ultimately the nurses had to deal with the consequences, they were over-worked, under-staffed and became critically ill themselves. What angered me the most was the reluctance of others; they hear the same public messages and the same sad stories but refused to comply with the simplest of requests to ensure our health and safety. When our communities were first requesting us to wear face masks, I was out on an errand and a man started mocking everyone in the store I was in for

wearing a mask. The man was with his children and he pointed to us and said “Look at all these people! They’re afraid they’re going to get sick.” He missed the point; we wore them to protect one another.

Nurses and other frontline workers are the sacrificial lambs of the COVID-19 Pandemic. We rely on them to give us medical attention, yet they often did not have the proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to work safely in hospitals. Some nurses in California even went on strike and were put on leave because they demanded more PPE before returning to work. There weren’t only equipment shortages but also in nurses and hospital beds as well.<sup>1</sup> Entire communities asked the public to limit their time inside venues like grocery stores and restaurants to slow down the spread of COVID-19. This request was criticized by business owners especially those struggling to keep their doors open before the outbreaks occurred.

I know I will never forget this period, but with my film I want viewers to understand the complexity of the situation and the harm attitudes against these protective measures has done. The challenge I had was not to depict the protesters in my film as monsters, they are people under a lot of pressure. They don’t understand what is happening, they didn’t accept the facts, so they continue to live wagering their lives daily. Like the sick, the protesters are struggling and unwell too. The spread of misinformation confused people into acting irrationally when they should have shown empathy.

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Campbell, "What It's Like to Be a Nurse Working on the Front Lines of COVID-19," Healthline, April 21, 2020, [PAGE], accessed March 03, 2021, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/what-its-like-to-be-a-nurse-working-on-the-front-line-of-covid-19#Our-nurses-need-our-support-more-than-ever>)

## REVIEW OF INFLUENCES/ LITERATURE:

As I constructed my film's narrative, I paid close attention to current events and the public's response to the coronavirus pandemic. I reviewed *Save The Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need* and *Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation* to effectively portray this crisis in animation. Once I completed my storyboards and, understood all I needed to begin production, I established a list of daily tasks including 3D modeling, character design, rendering, blocking and 2D animation. *Unwell* is set in a modern US city with most scenes taking place in a hospital, I needed to become more familiar with architecture to model the hospital and other buildings for my animation. I used visual references to create other objects in Autodesk Maya. I designed my characters after those I'm familiar with so I could better understand how to animate them.

### Coronavirus Pandemic

The coronavirus outbreak has affected people worldwide, but it also caused social turmoil within communities throughout the United States. While most countries with outbreaks imposed strict measures to protect populations, the U.S. relied on local government to make decisions often recommending protocols rather than requiring them. This caused many small businesses to close but the inability to follow health guidelines has prevented businesses to reopen safely. In *The New York Times* article '*The Staggering Rise in Jobless Claims This Week*' explains that in March 2020 when it was published there were 630,000 unemployment reports amongst 15 states. At this point in the pandemic, restaurants, bars, schools and any high-traffic venues were closed to prevent the airborne virus from spreading.<sup>2</sup> Later, public health officials announced that people may resume some normal activity if face masks are worn. Many refused to follow the advice, and this resulted in an increase in infections, overwhelmed hospitals

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<sup>2</sup> Quoctrung Bui and Justin Wolfers, "The Staggering Rise in Jobless Claims This Week," *nytimes.com*, March 19, 2020, Accessed October 31, 2020.

and preventable deaths.<sup>3</sup> Living under these unusual circumstances for months has inspired the narrative for *Unwell*. The strain I see in healthcare workers and the negative attitudes and carelessness I have witnessed first-hand has made me frustrated. At this time, there needs to be more support for healthcare workers and problem-solving efforts, but instead we have conflict. I made the decision to have a peaceful resolution in my film where, in the end, the characters find empathy for one another (Fig. 12).

## **Architecture**

Architecture, especially with institutional settings in *Unwell*, is crucial to understanding the story. The medical center is where most of our attention is. Anthony is a nurse there, it's transformed from a secure, warm environment to a somber place after the outbreak. I used references of medical equipment and photos of hospital rooms to establish the lighting. Another institutional building I created was a City Hall structure. Originally the protestors gathered on sidewalks, but they needed more space to give the appearance of a large crowd. The protestors were upset over the closure of businesses the protest at the City Hall connected it to the government. The 3D building model was created in Maya.

Lizzy's Café has evolved visually more frequently than any other environment. It started as a small building to reflect that it's a modest business. As I constructed the building in Maya, the café was too crowded inside, so I expanded it and gave it more windows to allow more natural light in. Anthony's apartment is made of just two rooms: the bathroom and living room. Anthony is a little frugal with his lifestyle. His profile is a young nurse, he probably still has student loans and relies only on his dog for company. I tried to remember these factors when I made his home. Rob's Barbershop is the most recent setting added to the story. The barbershop relied on props to indicate what type of business went on inside the building like scissors and hairspray cans. Because Rob interacts with child customers, I modeled a carousel horse chair for him to sit on. (Figure 1)

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "Leading by Example, Some Politicians Urge Residents to Wear Face Masks," [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com), April 4, 2020, Accessed October 31, 2020.



## Screenwriting and Storyboarding

Since I entered the animation program, I have become familiar with themes filmmakers use. In *Save the Cat*, Blake Snyder outlines 10 types of stories he defines and examples we can recognize. His categories are: Monster in the House, Golden Fleece, Out of the Bottle, Dude with a Problem, Rites of Passage, Buddy Love, Whydunit, The Fool Triumphant, Institutionalized and Superhero. Snyder explains the distinct differences between each type in detail in his book. However, since I established my thesis' message, I focused on his 'Monster in the House' type. With these films the main character is driven by their primal instincts such as survival or rescuing a loved one. In *Unwell*, Anthony already puts others ahead of himself, he's a nurse. After he becomes infected with Coronavirus, he worries about Lizzy, a café owner who contemplates protesting shutdowns with other angry business owners. Other films that fit into this category are *Jaws* and *Jurassic Park*, their plot is to survive at all costs.<sup>4</sup>

In *Directing the Story*, Francis Glebas demonstrates storyboarding with his own panels. I reviewed some of his lessons while I formed my storyboard. The panels' purpose is to visually plan composition, effects and camera movements in a film, they lack details like color to save on time. I have revised my storyboard until it was properly paced, and the story was comprehensible. I began with a script but ended early it because I was unsure how accessible voice actors and recording would be if campus closed again during production. My new challenge was to convey everything non-verbally, I would have to rely on gestures to communicate the story to the viewers. *Directing the Story* in Chapter 9, Glebas teaches readers about common gestures and symbols that help audiences understand films.<sup>5</sup>

## Cable News Network (CNN)

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<sup>4</sup> Snyder, Blake, "Save The Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need," (2013): 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> Glebas, Francis, "Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques For Live Action and Animation," (2018): 214-216.

Knowing that the pandemic regulations could hinder my search and recording voice actors, I opted to keep dialog out of my film. But I still wanted to convey the serious nature the pandemic has. I understood the Coronavirus' effects by watching the news daily. On CNN, I watched experts describe the situation and ER doctors plead to viewers to stay home. Despite their warnings and increasing deaths, people defied restrictions set to lower cases. As I watched I noticed how the screen was divided to allow interviews, graphs and breaking news headlines to be shown simultaneously. After I considered including newscasts, I started paying attention to the graphics and color schemes being shown (Fig. 2). Using After Effects I was able to mimic the same motion graphics to make a convincing news broadcast for the animated world I created.

### **Glen Keane**

When designing my characters, I began thinking of characters that I was already familiar with, I've always admired the drawing style Glen Keane has. Keane's characters all have wide, brilliant eyes and soft curves in their bodies. Keane has a nearly 50-year career in character animation, his best-known characters were created for Disney Animation Studios, Ariel, Aladdin, Tarzan, Rapunzel and many others. I drew my inspiration from Aladdin and although Aladdin and Anthony's stories couldn't differ more, they would fit each other's profile. Both are noble, young men. They each face an adversary but remain humble (Fig. 3). I continued looking to Keane's characters for a look for Lizzy, her proportions are a compilation of female characters he created.

### **Andreas Deja**

Last year I had the pleasure of meeting Andreas Deja, another Disney animator who often supervised the animation of villain characters such as Jafar, Gaston and Scar. I listened to Andreas speak in Burbank at a panel and what he said will always stay with me. When he was asked to animate Gaston from Beauty and the Beast, he was requested to make him handsome. He said he struggled with the idea of making a villain good-looking because we don't normally portray bad characters in an attractive way. I

grappled with this problem as well. Rob is the most profound protester in my film, (Fig. 10), he was just that in my storyboard until I realized that he needs to be a business-owner. I remembered in the news that many salons and barbershops were ordered to close due to concerns about social distancing. So, I thought Rob should run his own barbershop. After making this decision, I considered his abrasive-masculine demeanor and profession, he needed to look like he might be vain, with a body-building physique. I wanted Rob's body to contrast with Anthony's to appear intimidating and aggressive. Gaston matched the same qualities, but I didn't want to portray Rob and the other protesters in such a negative way. Rob has a moment when he redeems himself, so to show that he's also a compassionate person I show him in this shop interacting with a young customer ahead of the protesting (Fig. 1).

## **Story Corps**

I follow animation topics on various social media platforms, and a non-profit organization called StoryCorps produces a series of animations (Fig. 4), from interview recordings of ordinary people. They sometimes recall firsthand accounts of historic events like racial segregation in the south or about being stationed in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Often these animations are sentimental, the interviewees express loss or love they've experienced.

In *Danny & Annie*, a 5-minute film features the voices of Danny & Annie Perasa, a couple from Brooklyn. They spoke about their first date and their wedding day, 27 years earlier. Danny loved his wife Annie and, in the interview, described marriage as being like color television, saying "you don't want to go back to black & white." Then they explained that Danny was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He shares his final wishes and hopes Annie feels the same way at his funeral as she did at their wedding. The animation in this series usually don't have a lot of dynamic action but it's used to express feelings. I wanted my film to accurately portray all the despair that the pandemic has caused but we are left with some hope. I want my viewers to feel as humble as I feel after watching a StoryCorps video.

## **DESCRIPTION AND IMAGES OF THE ARTWORKS:**

Before determining the topic of my thesis, I already knew I wanted to create an animation about support. I try to outwardly show my support to loved ones as often as possible, but I had difficulty turning it into a concise short film idea. As news of the Coronavirus outbreak spread through every media outlet, I noticed two clear sides formed in communities. There were populations who saw the efforts to preserve health as restrictions on their freedoms and on the other hand nurses, doctors and EMTs that expose themselves to infection every day.

My preproduction process began with drawing panels of storyboards, this established each action that would happen in the film. In this stage, I went through many edits to make my message clear. Somehow while drawing my characters repeatedly, I began to understand them and consequently their appearances started to develop (Fig. 5).

Anthony is a young nurse when the Coronavirus outbreak occurs and when I started showing interactions between his patients it reflected some of my own experiences of people reacting to having a male nurse (Fig. 6). Elderly men have an especially difficult time overlooking gender stereotypes, however; I decided to focus less on this issue and more on the economic problems small businesses have. I kept Anthony male to set him apart from the rest of the nurses and later it would make more sense for Rob the barber, to get into a physical altercation with a man vs. a woman. In addition to this, I thought it was fitting to name him “Anthony” after Dr. Anthony Fauci, whose maintained his professional demeanor even when the facts and his statements were challenged by various government officials regarding the Coronavirus.

I have considered several “Anthony” designs before settling on this current model. (Fig. 6) He’s fluctuated in age, ethnicity and proportion, how he appears tells us so much about his personality. He’s a healthy, young nurse who takes responsibility and his work seriously. He cares for others whether or not they are his patients. I used a bold color palette with his clothing to emphasize his heroic qualities (Fig.

7). Superheroes often wear bright colors to stand out and draw eyes to them. In his sleepwear costume he is wearing gray lounge pants; I did this to amplify the idea that he's not himself. He's feeling sick and his sleep shirt is meant to be one from his college days, it bears the school's emblem. Inside Anthony's apartment we understand that he's sick because of the evidence: cough syrup on the sink, tissues on the table, he wakes up on the couch. We assume he lives alone because when he awakes from his dream his dog, laying on top of him, is spooked as well.

Lizzy is a small business owner; she operates a café next to the hospital (Fig.8). The short opens in her café before the virus turns the world upside down. The café is almost an extension of her personality, it's warm inside but modestly decorated. In the wake of ordered closures, Lizzy has a difficult choice to make; comply but may lose her business or remain open and risk the health of herself and others (Fig.9). This is the reality for many businesses, the owners have voiced their concerns and had to lay off employees.

Rob, another business owner in this story has taken a strong stance against the closure orders (Fig.11). He operates a barbershop next to Lizzy's Café and is passionate about hair styling. I tried to show this in the furniture and props used in the barbershop. I considered this in Rob's character design, he needed to have a neat, trendy look. We know he cares about his customers but forgets this when his business is threatened.

Anthony becomes infected with COVID-19 as a result of working around sick patients and he later has a nightmare. In his dream, he is taken to Lizzy's Café by a deceased patient's spirit, outside the virus is visible and it mutates the infected. Anthony can see that everyone is at vulnerable to the virus and careless behaviors only make matters worse. He's unable to protect Lizzy and wakes up to a news broadcast, the rates are getting worse, and the death toll is high.

My film's production was completed using Autodesk Maya and Toon Boom Harmony. The 3D modeling and animation had to be rendered from Maya before composited and animated over top in

Harmony. When considering lighting and color schemes, I made color key studies. This helps with conveying the right emotion, saturated scenes seem happier than gray ones with dimmer lights.



Figure 1

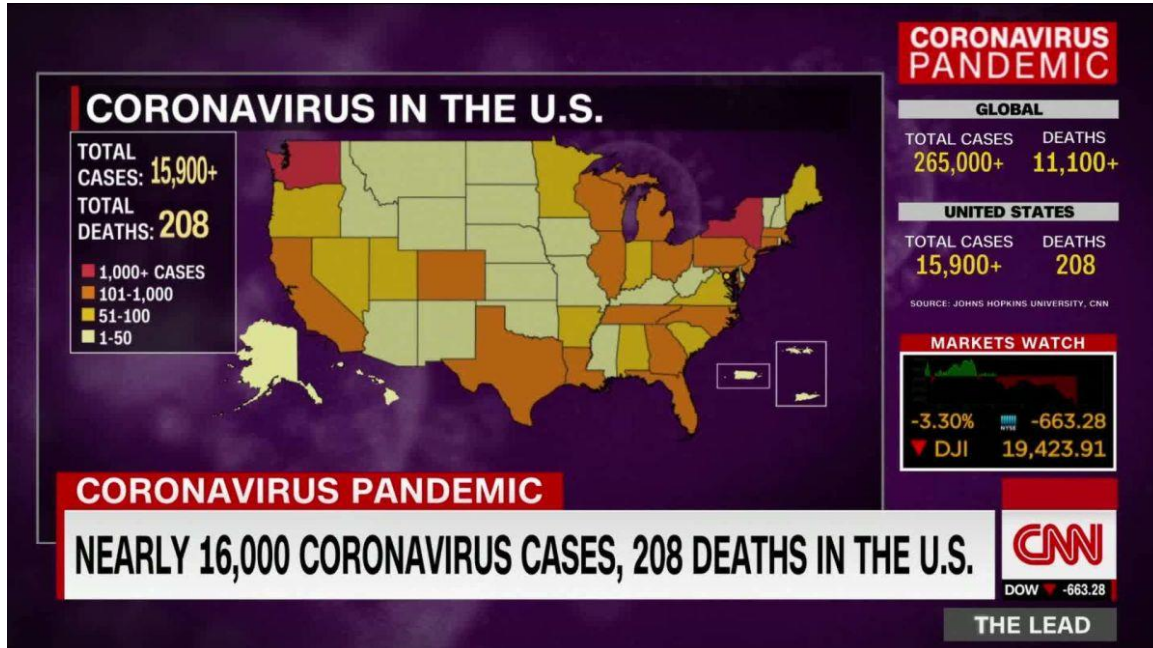


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5

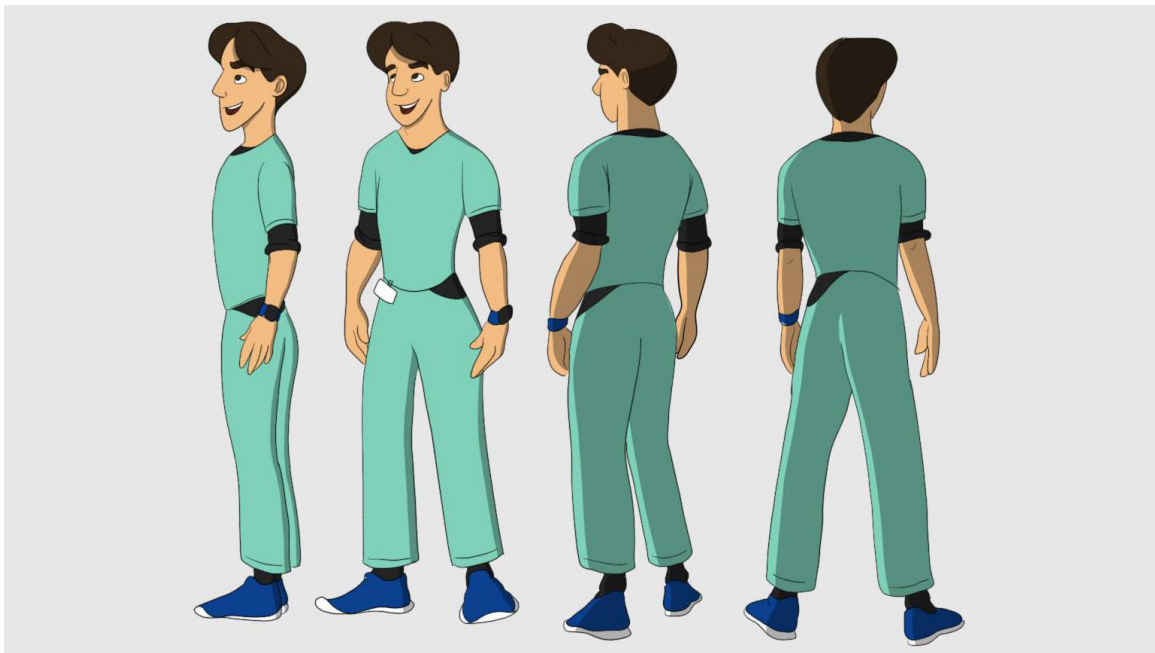


Figure 6





Figure 7

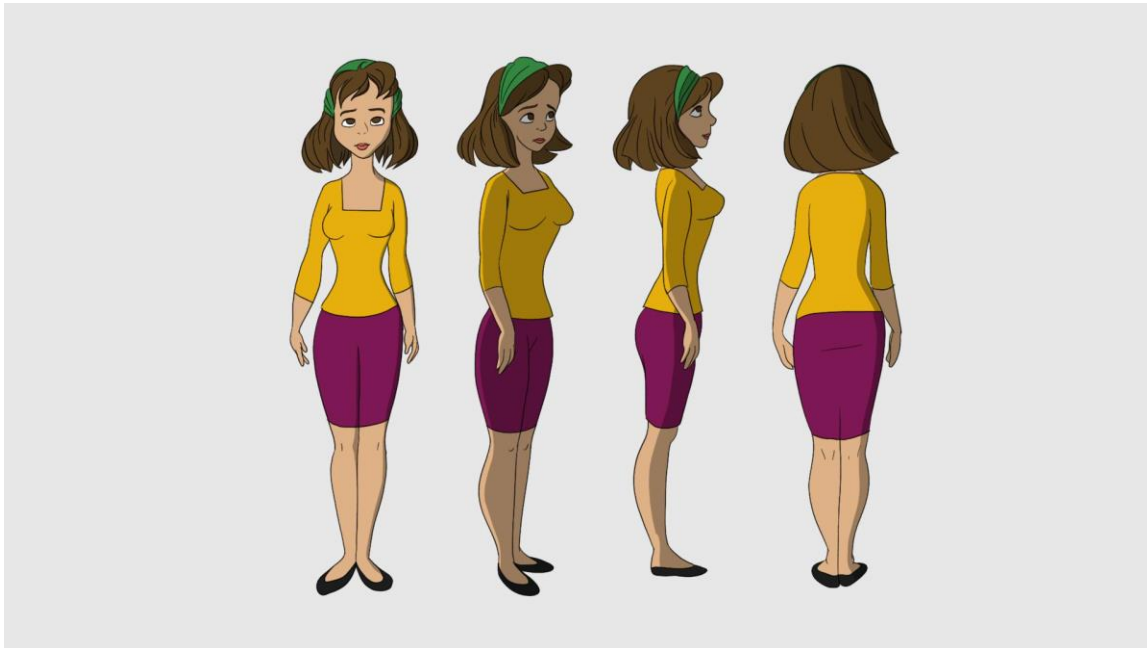


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

## **CONCLUSION:**

The purpose of this project is to not only document this extraordinary circumstance that affects everyone but to concisely express the other crises happening simultaneously. The coronavirus Pandemic caused several problems that we weren't prepared to handle. To lower the risk of spreading small businesses had to restrict themselves by serving their customers at a distance or not at all. Business owners protested the restrictions or decided to ignore them. This risked the health of their customers and employees. This dilemma has everyone scrambling for a solution, but there was a lack of organized efforts, cooperation and patience. If everyone understood and agreed to follow the restrictions from the beginning the number of infections would be much lower. But instead, the cases soared all through 2020 and many people lost their lives.

## **EXHIBITION STATEMENT:**

“Cover your face. Stay at least 6 feet away.” These are the slogans of the COVID-19 Pandemic that we should all be familiar with. It has changed our daily lives and social norms almost overnight. Going to work, school and church unprotected is now considered risky, or life-threatening. I have hope that all our routines will return to normal soon, but before this crisis passed, I wanted to capture all the hardships and concerns in an animated film.

This short film was an experiment for me, I wanted the chance to use 2D and 3D animation software. Although many animated films blend or make use of both methods, until now, I practiced them separately. It was very challenging working between multiple programs but by doing so my knowledge of their functions expanded. Building a story was another hurdle; many devastating events have occurred during the pandemic, I had to choose the greatest issue at the time I started. As hospitals struggled with having enough staff to care for patients, surrounding businesses were restricted or closed to ensure the health of employees and customers. More pressure was added to the situation when nurses and doctors feared their exposure would be lethal as many of them were infected and died. Restaurants were greatly affected; their dining rooms could only be filled by a fraction of their normal capacity.

With the ever-increasing death toll, isolation and job loss, we have found little comfort. Social distancing been difficult accommodate at times, but as human beings we can always find opportunities to stay connected. We call, write and we hold Zoom meetings just to have a few minutes with loved ones. Standing on either side of glass doors and windows is another trend families and friends have used to visit each other safely. Now that vaccines are being distributed and we will soon resume all activities, I think will miss that gesture the most. Showing others care without physical contact yet sustaining all the emotion is as meaningful as a long embrace.

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